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ABSTRACT

Reasons for George McGovern's presidential election failure are summarized in the context of McGovern's rhetoric as a challenger. Taking the point of view that McGovern abandoned the traditional rhetorical advantages of the challenger, the authors conclude that this abandonment along with the problems of financing, the impression of alignment with extremist groups, the Eagleton crisis, the image-making power of President Nixon, and the unmeasured damage of "political sabotage" led to the McGovern defeat. Without the "challenger's rhetoric," the Democratic contender emerged as a moralist-rhetorician--a position which does not win elections, the authors conclude. (CH)

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The Rhetoric of the Challenger: George Stanley McGovern

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The Rhetoric of the Challenger: George Stanley McGovern

Call it irony. Presidential year 1972 was supposed to have been a campaign based on issues; a campaign which would offer the American electorate the clearest most decisive choice in recent political history.[1] It was supposed to have been a contest between a practitioner of the new politics and a master of traditional politics.[2] It was supposed to have been a campaign which would inspire millions of first-time voters to become involved in the American political system.[3] It was supposed to have a challenger who offered credibility as opposed to incredibility, trustworthiness versus untrustworthiness, and statemanship as opposed to political gamesmanship.[4] An incumbent president from a minority party was to have received a major challenge by the candidate of the country's majority party. And yet, in terms of the proportion of the loss, there is reason to question whether a real challenge was made. Certainly, in terms of electoral votes, the 1972 majority party candidate represented less of a challenge than had a third party candidate in 1968 and less of a challenge than any incumbent in history has been given by the candidate of the other major party. And finally, and perhaps most ironically, it was supposed to have been a traditional

rhetorical campaign where it would be possible to analyze the rhetoric of the incumbent and the rhetoric of the challenger according to traditional criteria of the genres.

Although we suggest that the irony in campaign 1972 was that the rhetoric of the challenger sounded like the rhetoric of an incumbent and the rhetoric of the incumbent was, almost, non-verbal;[5] the thesis of this analysis is that George Stanley McGovern was not an effective challenger bacause he abandoned the traditional rhetorical advantages of the challenger. To explain this analysis it is necessary to compare McGovern's rhetoric (what he did and what he said) with the traditional rhetoric of the challenger (what McGovern did not do and did not say).

Although the focal point of this paper must necessarily be concerned with both McGovern's rhetoric and traditional challenger rhetoric, our remarks are premised with the acknowledgment that the analysis is in retrospect. It is not suggested that the characteristics discussed herein were planned by McGovern and his staff. Rather, we would contend that McGovern was forced into positions by factors in the "rhetorical situation." From the beginning to the end of the campaign, McGovern was faced with five problems, any one of which was potentially damaging, but which together proved devastating. The problems of financing both a jet-age and multi-media

campaign were tremendous; the impression of alignment with the fringe or extremist groups as well as the Eagleton crisis were, in terms of image, insurmountable; the irony of opposing history's champion image-maker and consummate politician president was devastating; and finally the extent to which he had to adjust because of political sabotage is still undetermined.[6] The positions to be examined were not planned by the McGovern campaign staff--but occurred as results of conditions which could not be, or at least were not, controlled.

McGovern's 1972 rhetorical challenge can be analyzed in terms of three characteristics--each of which can be illustrated in his formal speeches and informal remarks and each of which merits academic investigation as a possible explanation of his overwhelming loss to Richard Nixon.

The first characteristic is concerned with image, the image McGovern attempted to create and the image the electorate held of the Senator.

In the footsteps of Truman, Stevenson, Kennedy, Johnson, and Humphrey, McGovern took his case to the voters, trying in ten weeks between Labor Day and election day to reach as many as he could. In chartered jets, he crisscorssed the nation, trying to hit three, sometimes, four media markets in a day, making three, four, or five speeches

at outdoor rallies, fund-raising dinners, union halls, college campuses, shopping centers, and airports in a frantic effort to work the political magic that had won him the key primaries and the Democratic presidential nomination.[7] In addition, in countless thirty and sixty second television spots, a film biography, and six half-hour television speeches voters were exposed to messages which attempted to portray the Senator as a man of character--a man of intellect, principle, and competence to govern.

For all of this effort, a Harris survey reported just prior to election day that fifty-five percent of those interviewed said that McGovern did not seem trustworthy or credible like a president should. Words used to describe McGovern's image to pollsters were "fuzzy thinking," opportunist, a preacher, radical, and too much like a politician. And an NBC survey reported that the primary issue in the campaign had been the image of George McGovern.[8]

The irony is that the McGovern campaign staff had pinned their best hopes for the presidency on McGovern's character versus Richard Nixon's. The strategy was simply to build on the candidate's character, his honesty, sincerity, compassion, and decency. The twin themes of his campaign were credibility and character. Image building efforts and all campaign strategies converged on the person of George McGovern who was concerned about the lack of credibility in government.[9]

Contributing to the breakdown in McGovern's image were his continuous revisions of specific programs--notably his welfare and tax reform plans[10] and his vacillating alliances, first with the anti-establishment coup who brought him the nomination and then with the sworn enemies of the new liberals--men like Richard Daley and Lyndon Johnson. But without question, the most significant factor was the Eagleton candidacy (probably the most shattering blow to any presidential candidate in the nation's 200-year history) and McGovern's oscillating rhetoric during the crisis. The Eagleton episode damaged McGovern's image with much of the electorate--even those who had been strong supporters. For example, a Newsweek poll taken during the last days of September found that young voters around the country mentioned the Eagleton affair as one of their main sources of disillusionment with Senator McGovern.[11] One advantage that George McGovern had had over Richard Nixon was his aura of rock-like integrity. The Eagleton affair destroyed that aura and reversed his momentum to the extent that he was never able to regain enough credibility to get people to listen and believe his very serious charges against Nixon and his administration.

To understand the last few weeks of McGovern's campaign, it is necessary to understand what was happening to the man. Throughout his career, he had perceived himself

and had been perceived by others as an honest, intelligent, moral man. As an editorial in The Nation wondered:

> Can a Good Man Win? Is it possible that Senator McGovern just might win the Democratic nomination and then go on to win the presidency? There is something rather terrifying in the prospect. Good men have made it to the White House so infrequently that the thought of George McGovern's becoming President is positively unnerving. We have had, of course, great Presidents, men of high intelligence, courage, vision, high character, and other admirable qualities, but genuine human decency has not been a common trait. George McGovern is one of the rare good men in national politics. It is difficult to imagine his being vindictive or inconsiderate or indifferent to human suffering. His decency as a human being, let it be confessed, is a distinct liablilty.[12]

Now picture this man with a high self-concept trying to replace a president who he considers to be calloused to the loss of human lives, indifferent to the poor and suffering, corrupt in dealings with big business, and condoning political sabotage and criminal acts at Watergate. Imagine what frustration McGovern must have suffered when he could not get people to believe that he was the man of integrity and compassion. In desperation, McGovern turned to ad hominum rhetoric, the second characteristic of his campaign speaking.

Ad hominum rhetoric was apparent in terms of the Senator's personal attacks and language choice in many of his speeches. McGovern's sole instrument was attack as he proceeded on evangelical tours across the East and Midwest in which he cast himself as the vessel of American idealism and Mr. Nixon as the head of the most morally

corrupt Administration in the history of the United States. His tone was harsh, his language hyperbolic, and the sweep of his indictment was, at times, virtually all inclusive. For example, in Columbus, Ohio, McGovern talked about "nutty" public-opinion polls and "lousy" newspaper columnists and then described some conservative newspaper columnists as "lousy, bitter, paranoid, predictable, despicable, obnoxious propagandists who are consistently wrong and who write nothing good about any candidates more liberal than Genghis Khan."[13] In Tacoma, Washington, McGovern accused the television networks of "giving President Nixon's lackeys" as much publicity as they were giving his own campaign. He said, "it galls me to see some second-rate bureaucrat getting equal time on the evening news."[14] And by October, McGovern compared Nixon to Hitler, described the President as behaving "like a reformed drunk for visiting Moscow and Peking after a career as an anti-Communist,"[15] charged on television that the President who must set the moral tone of the nation has an "administration that reeks with permissiveness toward corrupt interests,"[16] termed the President as "power mad," and finally made a psychiatric diagnosis in Seattle when he said, "any laboring man or woman who supports Richard Nixon ought to have his head examined. . . and any young person who supports the President is too confused to know which end is up."[17]

While McGovern's ad hominum rhetoric was definitely offensive, his discussion of issues was defensive rhetoric, the third characteristic of his campaign speaking. Beginning in the primaries, the Senator had presented specific proposals for curing what he viewed as the nation's ills. Once the specifics of his programs were scrutinized (first by other candidates for the Democratic nomination and then by Nixon surrogate speakers),[18] the proposals had to be defended. And as McGovern defended, revised, and then defended again such programs as tax and welfare reform, he had little time to attack the specifics of the administration's policies. On issues, he was the defender, not the challenger. This was apparent in his television spots which showed the Senator talking to groups of workers, veterans, or senior citizens. Following a brief explanation of his various programs, the Senator would say that some call his programs radical or extremist and would allow the assembled group to defend him with righteous indignation. The spots were designed to defend--to tell the people that McGovern was not really as bad as they believed.[19]

But McGovern could not defend himself directly from the underlying charge which was affecting his image. His proposals were not just radical in many minds. They were also considered foolish. A welfare plan which would cost $220 billion was not just radical to a populous who lacked the sophistication to understand the economics. When

you select the wrong man for a running mate and feel you have to dump him from the ticket, judgment is called into doubt. Such doubt can make a candidate become defensive but there is no way to defend when listeners lose faith in judgment.

McGovern's rhetoric was not that of the traditional challenger. When McGovern abandoned or was denied the offensive positions on issues, he lost one of the advantages which are traditionally the challenger's. It is the incumbent who has to defend unworkable solutions to insolvable problems. The challenger is allowed to develop the problem. But like an intercollegiate debater, McGovern had to give a plan--and then had to defend the plan without benefit of the last affirmative rebuttal. No challenger in the nation's history has abandoned the right to attack without proposing solutions and won. Goldwater tried in 1964 and failed. Nixon, Kennedy, and Eisenhower did not abandon the challenger's offensive position.[20]

McGovern also abandoned two other roles traditional to the challenger. Successful challengers have been, idealogically, from the mainstream of one of the major parties. And while past challengers may have been, on some issues, a little to the right or left of the majority of the party, they have not been the representatives of the outer or fringe groups. Normally, the fringe groups have eventually coalesced around their parties' candidate--

even though he has been more conservative or more liberal than they prefer. The two major exceptions in contemporary politics have been Goldwater and McGovern--both of whom as representatives of the fringe groups attempted what is apparently impossible--to reform the idealogical majority around the idealogical minority. That they did not succeed is unquestionably an understatement. The significance of ideological deviation can be illustrated by the third dimension of traditional challenger rhetoric.

Successful presidential candidates have relied, at least rhetorically, on traditional American values. Beginning with Eisenhower in 1952 through Nixon in 1968, successful challengers have conducted surveys to determine the mood and dominant values of the electorate and then, through their rhetoric, appealed to those values.[21] Their appeals to these values have been reinforced from their positions within the idealogical mainstream of their political parties. But McGovern (like Goldwater) did not reinforce those basic values. Instead he tried to be a belief leader--attempting to urge Americans to forge ahead, to try new ways while discrediting the old. Throughout the campaign, the Senator proposed another era of rapid social and fiscal change at a time when most Americans appeared to be searching for an era of consolidation and stability. In his nomination acceptance speech he said "we are not content with things the way they are" and

proceeded to enumerate:

> Our deep need is not for idleness, but for new housing, hospitals, national health insurance; for facilities to combat pollution and take us home from work; for schools for our children and credibility of our system in the eyes of our own people.[22]

The abandonment of the traditional values of the dominant forces in his party forced McGovern into having to defend his beliefs by explaining repeatedly that new ideas did not make him an extremist and that his position to the left of the Democratic Party was, in reality, the mainstream of the new Democratic Party. He made his theme "Come home, America,"[23] but millions of Democratic voters split their ballots on election day and said "Our home is not in the new Democratic Party; Give us back our party."

When McGovern suffered the most humiliating defeat in the history of presidential politics, it ended all doubt as to whether he was really a challenger. But if he was not a challenger, what was he? The Senator from South Dakota was a moralist. When he based his campaign on character and credibility, on attacks on the incumbent's moral stance, on leading his party and the nation to the acceptance of specific programs for solving the nation's moral problems, George McGovern the Moralist was speaking. Both he and the pragmatist sitting in the White House can summarize the next four years in Sam Rayburn's words, "The first thing you have to do is get elected."

Footnotes

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[1]It was to have been, Richard Nixon told us, the choice of the century. George McGovern agreed. Never in recent political history have two presidential candidates so thoroughly agreed to disagree on so complete a list of questions. Whether it was the Vietnam War or the larger issue of the United State's role in the world; whether it was in the area of crime, education, welfare, taxation or busing, Mr. Nixon's and Mr. McGovern's differences were total. And although the candidates' differing positions on these issues may have in part accounted for the overwhelming re-election of the President, there is sufficient evidence to support the contention that it was image and not issues which ultimately determined the outcome. See: Judith S. Trent, "Image Building Strategies in the 1972 Presidential Campaign," Speaker And Gavel, X (January, 1973), 39-45.

[2]Ibid.

[3]The McGovern campaign staff had assumed that McGovern would receive at least an 8 million-vote margin in the 18-24 year age bracket. In reality, the 18-24 year old voters split their votes evenly between McGovern and Nixon. And although the college student vote generally favored McGovern, the turnout at the polls of college and non-college youth was less than half of those eligible to vote--47 percent. James W. Davis. "A Political Scientist Views The 1972 Campaign," Central States Speech Association Convention, April, 1973.

[4]For a comparison of the candidates' pre-campaign and post-campaign images refer to Trent, Speaker And Gavel.

[5]By election day, it was obvious that Nixon had run for re-election in almost perfect privacy--emerging from the seclusion of the White House or Camp David for a few brief motorcades in Atlanta or northern Ohio or the suburbs of New York City, with three exceptions shunning television speeches (one of the three was his nomination acceptance speech and another was his five-minute election eve message), using thirteen radio speeches to outline his positions, and never directly acknowledging his opponent's challenges to debate.

[6]Trent, Speaker And Gavel.

[7]McGovern traveled over 100,000 miles in the weeks between Labor Day and the election.

[8]Stephen Isaacs, "Every Segment of Society Supported Nixon," The Washington Post, November 8, 1972, p. 17.

[9]McGovern consistently resisted all efforts of his staff during the primary campaign to build a glamorous or charismatic image for him. In fact, McGovern who loathes the whole idea of "image making and charisma," has said: "I think people are a little suspicious of people who come on too slick, too strong. I think they over-estimate the charisma factor which most of my supporters think is superficial." See: Robert Sam Anson, McGovern: A Biography (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 235.

[10]The assertion that McGovern's revisions undermined his credibility is supported by Walter Dean Burnham: "The crucial point so far as public opinion is concerned is this: People neither know or care very much about the details of policy, as a rule; but they are sensitive to wavering or unsteadiness in a candidate's positions." Walter Dean Burnham, "What Started the Landslide?" National Observer, November 18, 1972, p. 30. The quotation and reference are from James W. Davis, "A Political Scientist Views The 1972 Campaign."

[11]"The Youth Vote: Nixon's Ahead," Newsweek, October 2, 1972, pp. 18-20.

[12]Quoted from Anson, McGovern: A Biography, p. 268.

[13]James J. Kilpatrick, "What Became Of The 'Mild-Mannered' College Professor?," Cincinnati Enquirer, October 30, 1972, p. 5-B.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid.

[16]"McGovern Tries Giving 'Em Hell," Newsweek, October 16, 1972, pp. 29-30.

[17]"Campaign '72: The Homestretch," Newsweek, October 30, 1972, pp. 36-37.

[18]The day-to-day campaigning was delegated to a team of thirty-six surrogate speakers, including members of the Nixon family as well as members of the "official" Nixon family, men such as Earl Butz, Pete Peterson, Spiro Agnew, Richard Lugar and John Connally.

[19]McGovern had been counting on a late television blitz to help with his image problems. But the media campaign very nearly stalled in mid-September when cash reserves ran precariously low and was kept going only with a half million dollars in loans from the two brothers who are heirs to the Eli Lilly drug fortune. See: Newsweek, October 16, 1972.

[20]An examination of Nixon's campaign speeches in both the 1960 and 1968 campaign revealed that Nixon rarely proposed specific solutions to the problems he presented. Perhaps the best example was Nixon's steadfast refusal to discuss the details of his Vietnam plan in the 1968 campaign. Nixon's 1960 and 1968 speeches are examined in: Judith S. Trent, "An Examination and Comparison of the Rhetorical Style of Richard Milhous Nixon in the Presidential Campaigns of 1960 and 1968: A Content Analysis" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Michigan, 1970).

[21]In both the 1960 and 1968 campaigns, Nixon's rhetoric was permeated with appeals to traditional American values--appeals to the old Protestant-Puritan ethic of the small towns of America, of the decent, God-fearing, law-abiding citizens who value hard work, pride, dignity, thrift, honesty, the "dream of America," and in the spiritual faith which they believe has guided America in the past. In each of his campaigns, the foundation of Nixon's philosophical appeal was consistent with these values--and he urged that policy be based on these same values. For a more detailed explanation of Nixon's reliance on traditional American values as a framework for his attempts at identification with the electorate see: Judith S. Trent, "Richard Nixon's Methods of Identification in the Presidential Campaigns of 1960 and 1968: A Content Analysis," Today's Speech, 19 (Fall, 1971), 23-30.

[22]George McGovern, Nomination Acceptance Speech, Democratic National Convention, Miami Beach, Florida, July 14, 1972.

[23]The theme, "Come Home America" started not with the nomination acceptance speech but with McGovern's original declaration of candidacy, delivered from the Sioux Falls studios of KELO-TV on the evening of January 18, 1971.